

MARKET INTELLIGENCE ON SPIRITS, WINE AND BEER

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MARKET WATCH

**HEAVEN HILL:
THE NEXT GENERATION**
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LEADING A NEW ERA

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SUPER-PREMIUM GINS
NON-ALCOHOL BEER GROWS

The Winemakers

Women hold the top posts at many of California's most prestigious vintners

BY CAROL WARD

Growing up in the wine business at Wente Vineyards, Niki Wente knew from an early age that she wanted to be involved in the family business and, specifically, in vineyard operations. “I love being outdoors; I love science and math and botany—basically plant health became one of those things that I just absolutely loved to investigate and explore at a very young age,” she says. “Going through college and taking winemaking classes as well as vineyard and viticulture classes, I developed a passion for wine and its whole form, from growth to bottle. Through my career, I’ve evolved to be able to make my own wine, which has been something that’s been really rewarding for me.”

Theresa Heredia, director of winemaking at Gary Farrell Winery, came to winemaking in a different way. As the 2000s began, she was working on a PhD in chemistry with plans to become a professor. Some interactions with viticulture students sparked the realization that her skills would translate to the wine world. “I realized the science was the same, they were doing the same scientific experiments I was doing but the products were different. I had already visited Burgundy, Bordeaux and the Rhône Valley and had fallen in love with wine, so [embarking on a career] just made sense.”

Wente and Heredia had very different paths to achieving their current positions in the wine industry, but one common thread was the influence of other women in the field. “I started in 2002 at Joseph Phelps Winery, and I was hired by Sarah Gott, who was winemaker there at the time,” says Heredia. “I spent ten years there before joining Gary Farrell, and I was hired here by a woman as well.”

Before joining the family firm, Wente had a stint at Huneus Vintners, which had female winemakers producing the Quintessa and Flowers brands, she notes. And at Wente Vineyards, where Wente makes the Pinot Noir rosé, the director of winemaking is Elizabeth Kester. “All of my experience in the wine industry has been surrounded by these really incredible female leaders and winemakers,” Wente says. “I’ve been very fortunate in that I’ve had so many females that have guided the way for me.”

The influence of women can be felt throughout the industry, but the reality is that women aren’t even close to parity with men—in terms of numbers—on the winemaking side of the business. According to research from Women Winemakers of California and Beyond, a study conducted in 2020 revealed that

of the more than 4,200 wineries in California, approximately 14% reported a woman as their lead winemaker. The figure is up from the 10% reported in a similar study in 2011.

The study also showed certain regions to have higher concentrations of women winemakers. In Sonoma/Marin and South Central Coast—including the San Luis Obispo and Santa Barbara wine regions—women accounted for about 17% of winemakers, the 2020 data show, while in Napa Valley the percentage was about 12%. Other wine regions showed much lower percentages.

Jasmine Hirsch, general manager and winemaker at Hirsch Vineyards, says the industry could stand to be a bit more proactive in attracting women and minorities. “If we want to see change, if we want to see more women or more people of color in production leadership roles, we need to see more diversity in management leadership roles,” Hirsch says. “Who hires the winemaker? Obviously, it’s clear that on the production side there’s a real disparity in terms of female representation, but I see that in all aspects of the business.”



Theresa Heredia (pictured) married her degree in chemistry with an interest in viticulture and a love for wine in the early 2000's. Today, she is the director of winemaking at Gary Farrell Winery.

PHOTO BY (RIGHT) WILL BUQUOY

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Maggie Kruse (top), winemaker at Jordan Vineyard & Winery, says she was inspired by seeing other women thrive in winemaking. Kate Payne (above), winemaker at Stoller Family Estate, says women and their passion are becoming more accepted as the industry evolves.

"I remember going into meetings with our distributors and having almost entirely white men in the room," she continues. "It comes back to who has the power to hire and appoint people to leadership roles? If we don't see change in that, then I don't think we're going to see change in other areas of the business."

Overcoming Roadblocks

There's no question that the women who have been successful on the production side of the wine business have had some mountains to conquer to get to their current levels of influence. Sara Fowler, vice president of winemaking and operations at Peju Winery, joined the wine industry in the late 1980s. "When I was getting into it, the statistics showed that less than 7% of the industry was women, so we couldn't be very feminine, or

we didn't feel like we could," she says, recalling dressing "like boys" and wearing little or no makeup. "Now it seems unbelievable, but 30 years ago it was a very different world."

At The Duckhorn Portfolio, vice president for Decoy wine-making and winemaker for Migration Dana Epperson recalls a time several years back, at a different company, when she was excluded from tasting sessions in an apparent slight because of her gender, and when she was told women were hired to clean up afterward. "I would go home and cry," she says. "But if that happened to me now, I would push back."

And while some didn't encounter these roadblocks, they still endure comments about their fitness for the job. Heredia, for example, notes that women are sometimes seen as lacking the physicality for the job. Candidates who look like they can pick up a barrel aren't the only ones of value, she says. "A lot of winery people on the production side think you need to hire strong individuals, but in reality you need somebody who's got their mind on the wine and is passionate about it," Heredia adds.

Duckhorn winemaker and vice president of winemaking for Napa Valley Renée Ary says she didn't encounter many roadblocks on her path, but still endures questionable comments. "To this day I'll still get asked how old I am and if I started in this industry when I was ten, which is another way of asking if I have the experience to do what I'm doing," she says. "Male winemakers may not get that."

As the industry evolves, the acceptance of women is changing. Kate Payne, winemaker for Oregon's Stoller Family Estate, says perceived weaknesses are showing up as strengths. "Earlier on in my career, [my environment was] certainly male dominated, and women just weren't allowed to show emotion," Payne says. "I think that having and showing that emotion contributes to the resulting wine. I like to think that the wine is imbued with the passion we're feeling. I certainly think about that when blending."

PHOTO BY (TOP) ALEXANDER RUBIN PHOTOGRAPHY



Although the winemaking industry is becoming more inclusive, it hasn't always been a welcoming space for women. Dana Epperson (pictured), vice president for Decoy winemaking, recalls a time when she was deliberately excluded from wine tastings due to her gender.

Developing The Next Generation

Change is happening quickly in the wine industry, providing a broader range of opportunities than what's been seen in the past. Epperson, for example, says that while she supports women-focused outreach and mentoring groups, "I feel like the industry is shifting naturally. We're hiring the best person for each role, men or women."

Ary says she is witnessing the ongoing shift in real time. "I've seen a huge change over the last 20 years, but more-so over the last 5-8 years," she says. "Harvest interns provide a really telling way to see where the industry is going. Every year we get 4-8 interns, and at the beginning, it was all male. Over the last five years I've seen a huge flux in women coming out of school and wanting to go directly into wine. We've even had intern years that were all female, which is so cool and so different. The opportunities are there and if [women] want them they can grab them."

Despite different backgrounds and different approaches, many female winemaking leaders agree that outreach and mentorship is crucial to expanding the penetration and influence of women winemakers in the future. Maggie Kruse, winemaker for Jordan Vineyard & Winery, says she was inspired by Cathy Corison, an early pioneer for women in wine who launched Corison Winery in Napa Valley in 1987. Now an

industry leader herself, Kruse points out that many wineries, conferences, and universities have implemented initiatives to support female winemakers and encourage more women to pursue a career in winemaking.

"The future of winemaking is all about innovating, evolving, and reaching the next generation of wine drinkers," Kruse says. "Women are innately gifted at adapting and connecting with others to achieve a common goal, so I think it would only benefit wineries to encourage more women to get involved in the industry. I also believe it's important for women already in winemaking to provide guidance and mentorship to younger generations, whether that starts at the collegiate level or earlier."

For her part, Fowler is "actively trying to mentor as many women as I come across who want to get into this profession." But she also spreads the wealth, mentoring young men who show passion for the industry as well. Heredia says such efforts are definitely needed, but she adds that women need to seize opportunities that present themselves, especially now as many wineries are seeking to build up their ranks of female leaders.

"My advice to young women looking to enter the wine industry is to not feel intimidated," she says. "You have to get over that roadblock, learn how to navigate through, and work to get what you want."

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